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gets a chance

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# **GUILFORD'S WORST BAD EGG GETS A CHANCE INSTEAD OF A SENTENCE**

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**GERALD W. JOHNSON**  
(In Greensboro News)

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## GUILFORD'S WORST BAD EGG GETS A CHANCE INSTEAD OF A SENTENCE

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Greensboro has just got rid of one of the worst of her bad eggs. The manner of his going is the substance of this tale, wherein for convenience sake he will be referred to as Joseph Smith. His real name will be discarded, because there is a chance that he may return one of these days distinctly something other than a bad egg; and it is not necessary to the purposes of this story, because you, Mister reader, or Madame, being a well-conducted person, would not recognize it if it were told.

Not that it is unknown. On the contrary it is familiar indeed to the judges of the police and juvenile courts; familiar to every member of the police force; familiar to every newspaper reporter; and amounts to little less than an obsession with the probation and truant officers. But to those whose business never carries them outside the field of law-abiding respectability it would mean nothing. Joseph Smith will do as well.

Alias Joseph Smith, then be it explained, lays claim to 14 years and 15 crimes. The latter are not petty offenses, either; they range from burglary down. For the greatest of them the small body of Joseph Smith might be, under the letter of the law, strapped into the electric chair and roasted to a cinder; for the least of them a combination of a savage prosecuting attorney and a literal-minded judge might send him to the roads for a year. Joseph Smith is a very bad egg indeed.

Had you ever imagined that such things happened in the quiet, orderly little city of Greensboro? Fourteen years old, and loaded down with crimes enough to have filled a long and wicked life! Fourteen years old and, under a strict interpretation of the statute, his

life already forfeit to the state! Fourteen years old and already subject for the lighter of his misdeeds to some centuries of penal servitude, if he were given the limit of the law in every case against him. And yet, for all his appalling history, he is, to outward view, pretty much the same as any other 14-year-old boy. He is small for his age, tow-headed and bright-eyed, indeed, rather handsome. During the winter months you can see hundreds of just such boys pouring out of the schoolhouses at recess-time. Yet, Joseph Smith has broken into a house where people were sleeping during the night, which is a felony under the laws of North Carolina, the extreme penalty for which is death by electrocution.

### Why Joseph Was Bad.

What made of this ordinary school-boy, this potential good citizen of the city and the state, a felon at 14 years of age? Was it Satan, chance, environment, fate—or was it the misfortune of not having been orphaned early? Had he been a waif, the city, or the state, or some charitable organization would probably have taken him in hand, and given him every chance to make a man out of himself. But Joseph Smith, until quite recently, had both a father and a mother. The father was a crook, with a police-court record as long as your arm. The mother—well, perhaps the less said about the mother, the better; but it may be worth noting that one of her habits was to go away from the city for weeks at a time, leaving Joseph to knock about the streets, learning all the evil that he could garner there. What small boy, between the ages of 12 and 14, has not been filled with the mighty ambition to become a pirate? Joseph Smith became one; and that, perchance, is after all the main difference between him and other boys. Evidence of that is the fact that this very day he is as proud of his lawless deeds done in dead earnest, as other boys are of theirs, done in make-believe.

But a short time ago came the inevitable crash, and the career of Joseph Smith as a bad egg was ended. After exasperating months of fruitless endeavor, the police got him with the goods; and in the juvenile cell in Guilford county jail he confessed his 15 crimes with perhaps more pride than penitence; for after all, he is only 14 years old.

In the big courtroom, two stories below, the mills of justice were grinding away. Under the law, up until last year, it would have been possible to drop Joseph Smith, 14 years old, into the hopper of that ponderous machine, designed to break the hardest of hard men, and ill equipped to deal with small boys whose mania for playing pirate no father's stern kindness had repressed. But, luckily for Joseph Smith, the legislature of 1919 had written it into the statutes of North Carolina that naughty children shall no longer be crushed in the iron grip which the state, for its own defense, is compelled to lay upon grown men, hardened in crime.

Therefore Joseph Smith never went into the big courtroom, never faced his honor, the judge of the Superior court of this district, the battery of lawyers, the 12 unwilling jurors, never heard his doom pronounced from the formal bench of justice, never was marched away by some brawny officer of the law, never made the tragic journey down to Raleigh, never entered the massive, gloomy walls of that dreadful building by the railroad tracks, whose very shadow casts a chill upon the hearts of travelers as they pass upon the trains. Strong men find written over the portals of that house, "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." How much less chance of bringing out anything worth saving would there be for a 14-year-old lad! But Joseph Smith has not gone there; he is in the hands of the law, but the law of North Carolina no longer thrusts wayward children down into the maw of hell.

## Under the New Order.

On the contrary, one perfect, green and golden morning in the month of June, Joseph Smith was taken for a long automobile ride with some gentlemen, not one of whom wore a blue coat with brass buttons, or carried a revolver on his hip. People along the road certainly saw nothing resembling a convicted criminal being taken to serve his sentence for multiple crimes against the statutes made and provided and the peace and dignity of the state. All they saw was a motor car containing some men and a couple of small boys; and even had they been informed as to what was taking place, they might have hesitated to say which of the small boys was the criminal and which the son of the committing magistrate, merely going for a ride.

There was nothing in the least tragic about the journey of Joseph Smith to his place of detention. On the contrary, it would be difficult to imagine a pleasanter ride than that, through the rolling wheat fields of Guilford and Davidson, across the long toll-bridge that spans the tawny Yadkin, into the cotton fields of Rowan and Cabarrus, through city streets and country lanes, and many little towns, where porches and fences along the street were all aflame with pink and red climbing roses.

Nor was it at any forbidding pile of masonry, with narrow slits, heavily barred, for windows, and armed guards prowling up and down outside, that the journey ended. Three miles beyond Concord the automobile drew up before a red brick building with tall white columns in front, like some unusually magnificent country residence. Stretching away from it in a stately row facing the highway were four red brick cottages, a shop, and a schoolhouse still in course of construction. All in front were lawns and graveled driveways and flower-beds interspersed with shrubbery. At the rear was a trellis loaded heavily with a magnificent red rambler, blazing with



flowers; and in front of it holly-hocks, pink and the reddest of all imaginable reds, added to the riot of color.

On the driveway in front of the big building were assembled the reasons for all this—some 50 or 60 boys, ranging in size from an eight-year-old to some sturdy lads of 16. They were dressed in blue denim overalls that bore evidence of frequent scrubbing. They were tanned and fairly riotously healthy, as they proved by skylarking all over the place while they waited for orders from the two or three soft-spoken, tanned and stalwart men about the place. Presently one of them spoke, and instantly the assemblage fell into what the soldiers call "column of twos," each boy picking up a hoe as he moved. They were graded by size from the head of the column, and at the rear the hoes were well-nigh twice as tall as their bearers; but as one of the men stepped to the head of the column and it moved off, the rearmost pair swung their hoes to the shoulders with a flourish, and carried them jauntily away.

### North Carolina's New Idea.

Nothing mournful, nothing morbid, clung to that procession; yet only a few years since many of these would have been flung into the midst of the worst criminals that the state has produced, because the last one of them had violated some of the statutes written in the books of law. The great state of North Carolina, however, no longer looks upon her bad boys as in the same class with forgers and murderers and embezzlers; and instead of hurling them into the gloom of her prison walls, she puts them to live among flowers and green trees, and sets them to work in the sunshine where the crops are growing.

Such was the punishment meted out to Joseph Smith, bad egg of Greensboro, for his 15 crimes. He didn't like it at all. In that place of sunshine and cheer he was a fish out of water. Least of all was he favorably impressed by the tall, sinewy man, whose otherwise grave

face was lighted by a humorous gleam about the eyes, who seemed to be in charge of the whole business. Joseph Smith demanded at once that he be taken back to spend the rest of his days in Guilford county jail. In that place, and under that man, Joseph Smith will have to walk a chalk line, and he knows it. His 15 crimes will not make him a hero there; he has an uncomfortable certainty that if he undertakes to boast of his lawless deeds in that atmosphere he will be simply swept away by a great gale of laughter, and the thought of being suddenly reduced from the grade of a desperate character to that of a particularly simple-minded fool is gall and wormwood to his spirit. Why, they will not even do him the compliment of locking him up, and there is not so much as a picket fence around the place. So perhaps Joseph Smith will run away, at first; but after he has tried that a time or two, and found that all it gets him is an ignominious return by the chief of police of the first neighboring town he strikes, followed, perhaps, by a painful interview with one of the teachers equipped with a small, but distressingly tough and limber twig, and then by gibes from his fellows, he will drop that. Then presently he will take an interest in something else—maybe in his school books, maybe in what his increasingly cunning fingers can accomplish with tools, maybe in the literary and debating society of his house, but in something. And at that very moment Joseph Smith will have set his foot on the long upward grade toward decent citizenship, possibly toward that eventual return to Greensboro at which he will be glad that this article did not print his real name.

But Joseph Smith is not in yet. First it is necessary that his traveling companions be escorted through the plant, to marvel at the spotless cleanliness that pervades every nook and cranny, and the military tidiness of the living quarters. Then the officials of the party retire with him and the superintendent to discuss his enrollment, and the unofficial members of the party wait outside, where they are in-

voluntary witnesses to a little drama that they cannot forget, nor would, if they could.

### A Training School Drama.

A handsome motor car drives up, containing a middle-aged gentleman, and a lady, apparently his wife, and three young girls. The size and equipment of the automobile indicate wealth, and the dress and bearing of the party are no less eloquent of breeding. There is a consultation with one of the teachers and a messenger is dispatched somewhere. Ten minutes later another automobile, this one obviously belonging to the farm, drives up, and out of it leaps one of the lads who a while ago marched off at the head of the column. He is apparently approaching 16, dressed in the usual blue overalls, and as he whips off his big straw hat his face appears as sunburned as the others. Nor is it a bad face—on the contrary, rather a manly one, as the supple, strong figure is distinctly manly. What it may have been when it first arrived, one can only guess; but the rush of the elder woman to his arms, and the passion with which she throws her arms around him are ample evidence that the mother has never ceased to love him, no matter how egregious his folly.

Nobody knew the beginning of the story. Nobody could have had the brutality to inquire. What did it matter, anyhow, since in the boy's face, in his attitude, in his every gesture, the wayfaring man, though a fool, could have seen a happy ending and that right soon? But suppose that boy had been born 10 years earlier, and had committed his error, whatever it was, before this school was established? The other institution, the one at Raleigh, would probably have received him, and when it spewed him out not even his own sisters could have looked upon the thing he would have become without loathing; and while the mother might have thrown her arms around him still, it would have been with death in her heart.



“And some people,” said one of the unofficial observers, blowing his nose mightily and then carefully polishing his glasses which had suddenly acquired a suspicious dimness, “some people have said that this thing wasn’t worth while.”

That is the end of the story of how Greensboro got rid of one bad egg. But there is an epilogue. The officials added that when they returned from the interview with the superintendent, Joseph Smith got into the Jackson Training School by the skin of his teeth. There are four cottages. Each cottage is built to accommodate 30 boys. When Joseph Smith arrived, there were already 132 boys in the institution. Figure it out for yourself.

Guilford county some time ago resolved to erect another cottage at the school so that her own bad eggs might be taken care of, at least to the number of 30; but legal obstacles have been encountered which only the legislature can sweep away. There is a special session of the legislature next month, and if Guilford asks, it will grant the necessary permission for the county commissioners to go ahead with their plans.

There are other Joseph Smiths in the county, several in the city, and the child welfare officials are at their wits’ end to know what to do with them. Of course, the penitentiary is always open, but the county officials hesitate to use that means of egress from the dilemma. They somehow do not feel right, even if they have express authorization in the written law, about thrusting a small boy, even one who has violated the law, down into the Bottomless Pit. They remember certain remarks that once were made about people who do that sort of thing—remarks to the effect that in the case of such a man, which they fear might be construed to mean such a county, “it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were cast into the midst of the sea.”







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